

About The New Testament

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Wycliffite Manuscript The New Testament

Wycliffite Manuscript The New Testament

England, 1400-1450

This manuscript is a fifteenth-century Middle English translation of the New Testament made by Lollard disciples of John Wyclif (ca. 1330-1384). A precious witness to the tradition of translating Scriptures into English, this codex was, like most medieval books, a costly item even when it was new. It was also the object of alarm and condemnation by the ecclesiastical establishment at the time of its production.

Ever since the beginning of English letters in the Anglo-Saxon period (ca. 700-1100) some scholars have translated the Latin Vulgate Bible into English vernacular, while other scholars and churchmen have questioned the wisdom of making Scripture available to laymen in the vernacular. By ecclesiastical tradition the laity received biblical information through the clergy, who, with the aid of Mother Church, decided what was appropriate for the laity to know and provided (e.g. through sermons) the official explication of that knowledge. This highly institutionalized dissemination of biblical knowledge protected the Church's central position in Christian life, prevented laymen from becoming confused by obscure or problematic biblical

matter (especially in the Old Testament), and thus was orthodox practice in the Middle Ages. Ecclesiastical anxiety over laymen gaining direct access to the Bible in the vernacular was not acute through most of medieval times since books were too rare and expensive for many people to acquire, and literacy was limited to the clergy and a few in the highest ranks of society.¹ A book like this manuscript New Testament would have required the massacre of a herd of calves to provide the vellum, elaborate preparation of the animal skins to render them suitable for receiving ink, hundreds of hours of expert copying by trained scribes, and the provision of ornamented capitals and other page decoration (such as that on the first page, which is illuminated in gold, red, blue, and dark gray-purple) by a craftsman illuminator. Throughout most of the Middle Ages such books, if not owned by an ecclesiastical foundation, would be the property of only a few wealthy aristocrats and would circulate little if at all among the common people.

But John Wyclif changed all that. An immensely distinguished teacher and scholar at the University of Oxford, Wyclif, through his theological studies and his contacts with papal authorities on more than one issue, came to doubt the validity of Vatican authority and to urge that all Christians should instead follow the authority of "God's law" itself, and to that end he called for vernacular translations of the Bible. The aristocracy, who had the wherewithal to acquire expensive books, should assume the duty of sharing their knowledge of Scripture with people at large, since the clergy, following Church strictures, withheld such knowledge from the laity.² This manuscript no doubt owes its existence to Wyclif's cry for English translations of the Bible, a cry amplified by his followers,



Illuminated initial capital from the first page of the Wycliffite Manuscript.

known as "Lollards," both during and after the later years of his life. There is no evidence that John Wyclif himself translated the Bible (as was earlier thought to be the case): none of the early manuscripts bears his name, and nowhere in his surviving writings does he claim authorship of the Bible translation.³ We have no evidence that he even oversaw the translation. Yet it, and the Lollard movement itself, no doubt owe their existence to the impetus of Wyclif's writings.

It was Wyclif's doctrine of dominion by grace that necessitated vernacular Bibles.⁴ This doctrine countered the traditional

1. Deanesly, Margaret. *The Lollard Bible and Other Medieval Biblical Versions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1920), pp. 220-22.
2. Spencer, Helen L. "The Fortunes of a Lollard Sermon-Cycle in the Later Fifteenth Century," *Mediaeval Studies* 48 (1986), p. 389, n. 104.
3. Anne Hudson, ed. *Selections from English Wycliffite Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 162.
4. Deanesly, pp. 226-27.

view that all spiritual dominion in the Christian world was mediated by the papacy, the head of the ladder of grace, which passed grace on through archbishops, bishops, and priests to the priest's parishioners. Wyclif taught that all Christians stood in an immediate relationship with God, were directly responsible for obedience to God's law, and were direct recipients of God's grace. To know God's laws and to be sure they were observing them correctly, all Christians needed direct access to Scripture. Thus the doctrine of dominion by grace required that vernacular Bibles be disseminated as widely as possible. The 250-odd surviving manuscripts (complete and fragmentary) of the Lollard Bible – the largest number of manuscript copies of any Middle English text – are evidence that the dissemination Wyclif demanded was carried out. And the effect of that dissemination may be measured by the Church establishment's alarmed reaction in 1409, when Thomas Arundel, Archbishop of Canterbury, issued his *Constitutions* condemning Wyclif's teachings, concluding with the climactic charge that "to fill up the measure of his malice, he devised the expedient of a new translation of the Scriptures into the mother tongue."⁵ The *Constitutions* go on to forbid the translation of the Bible or the reading of such translations:

therefore we decree and ordain that no one shall in future translate on his own authority any text of holy scripture into the English tongue ... Nor shall any man read this kind of book, booklet or treatise ... publicly or secretly, under penalty of the greater excommunication ... Whoever disobeys this, let him be punished after the same fashion as an abettor of heresy and error.⁶

But books like this one show that the prohibition had limited effect.

What kind of translation is the Lollard Bible? Actually, the many manuscripts of this work reveal an evolving translational method which leaves a variety of Middle English versions. The earliest approach, especially evident in the first books of the Old Testament, is an excessively literal rendering in which the translators mechanically substitute English words for corresponding Latin words without changing the Latin word order to English word order. The unidiomatic, often nonsensical effect of this method of translation became apparent to the Lollards, and they developed a looser, more fluent technique of making the contents of the Vulgate Bible available to English laymen.⁷ In a "General Prologue" which survives (in whole or in part) in nine of the Lollard Bible manuscripts (though not in this copy), the later translational procedures are spelled out with considerable sophistication.⁸ In a discussion of the importance of using Middle English as opposed to Latin word order in the translation, the author of the Prologue explains that a Latin sentence like *Dominum formidabunt aduersarii eius* (1 Kings 2:10: "The adversaries of the Lord shall fear Him") will, if translated into Middle English with Latin word order, suggest the opposite of its intended meaning: "The Lord hise aduersaries shulen drede" (i.e. "The Lord shall fear His adversaries"). The correct

5. Ibid. p. 238.

6. Ibid. p. 296.

7. See Yonekura, Hiroshi. *The Language of the Wycliffite Bible: The Syntactic Differences between the Two Versions* (Tokyo: Aratake Shuppan, 1985), esp. pp. 12-18.

8. Josiah Forshall and Frederic Madden, eds. *The Holy Bible, Containing the Old and New Testaments, ... Made from the Latin Vulgate by John Wycliffe and His Followers*. 4 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1850), vol. 1, pp. 56-60.

meaning is conveyed by the looser rendering with English word order: “The aduersaries of the Lord shulen drede him” (i.e. “The adversaries of the Lord shall fear Him”). The General Prologue also defends a more flexible translation of Latin ablative absolute constructions, of polysemous words, of present participles, etc. It is this flexible method of translation (which the General Prologue describes as “more open”) that is used in this copy of the New Testament, although here and there, as in other manuscripts containing the more open translation, traces of the old stilted method remain, especially in the first two Gospels.

The achievement represented by this manuscript is more than simply a fluent translation of an unproblematic source text. As the General Prologue tells us, the Lollards’ Englishing of the Vulgate Bible involved four stages of scholarly activity. First, the translators had to establish an authoritative Vulgate text to translate. Many different versions of the Latin Bible were in circulation in the Middle Ages, and they often disagreed one with another – and with their Vulgate source. The Lollard translators worked hard to determine which readings were the ones St. Jerome intended in his Latin rendering of the Hebrew and Greek texts. The second phase of the Lollards’ scholarly endeavor was a systematic study of commentaries of the Church Fathers, especially as they were assembled by medieval scholars such as Nicholas of Lyra. The biblical quotations as well as the exegeses in these commentaries helped confirm the Lollards’ decisions as to which among several conflicting readings were to be preferred. The third phase dealt with arriving at an accurate understanding of problematic passages whose interpretation was in doubt. And finally, the

text had to be translated and the translation rechecked against the source text.

Despite this care in executing the translation, the result was not flawless, and errors remain in the Lollard Bible. But “this should surprise us less than that the effort was made at all, and that some understanding of possible means of improvement was reached.”⁹ The Lollard Bible is a major accomplishment by dedicated followers of Wyclif who did not bother to leave us their names. Attempts by Wyclif scholars in the past to assign the earliest, literal translations to Nicholas Hereford and the later versions to John Purvey (both contemporaries and followers of Wyclif) have been found to rest on insufficient evidence. We must be content with assigning authorship of the translation to the Lollards in general, who bore proudly the sobriquet which their enemies scornfully assigned to them – “Bible men.”¹⁰

In this Octavo Edition of the Wycliffite Manuscript all the books of the New Testament are prefaced by prologues ascribed to St. Jerome. As in other manuscripts of the Lollard Bible, The Acts of the Apostles are displaced to a position following the Epistle to the Hebrews and preceding The Epistle of St. James the Apostle. The text is written in double columns, usually 43 lines to the column. Following the New Testament is an eighteen-page lectionary indicating which texts from the Gospels and Epistles are to be read at church services over the course of the year. Blank pages at the beginning and end of the codex have been used for post-medieval (sixteenth-cen-

9. Hudson, Anne. *The Premature Reformation: Wycliffite Texts and Lollard History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p. 244.

10. Ibid. p. 228.

ture?) notations on plant husbandry. As is often the case with medieval manuscripts, the first few pages are covered with a reader's marginal annotations, while the rest of the volume is relatively free of such signs of intense scrutiny.

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Binding

The binding of the Wycliffite Manuscript of the New Testament is late-sixteenth-century dark brown calf over wooden boards measuring 10⁵/₈ x 7¹/₂ inches (267 x 190 mm). The front and back boards are elaborately gilt in the Lyonnese style. The outer borders are ornamented with small lions with flower decorations at the corners; the interior panel is formed with large arabesque ornamented corners on a gilt background around an elaborate central panel built of flower and arabesque decorations encompassing the letters "H S;" densely spaced acorn and flower tools fill the intervening space. The back board is identical to the front excepting the direction of the acorn ornaments.

The spine is divided by five raised bands forming eight panels, with two at the top and two at the bottom; each panel has gilt ornaments between rules. The spine and board edges have been restored and the clasps replaced.

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Collation: 8^o: blank, 1-19⁸, 20⁴, 21⁸, 22⁴.

Contents: blank. [1A^a-3D^b]: Gospel of Matthew. [3E^a-5A^b]: Gospel of Mark. [5B^a-7G^a]: Gospel of Luke. [7G^b-9G^a]: Gospel of John. [9G^b-10G^a]: Epistle to the Romans. [10G^b-11G^a]: First Epistle to the Corinthians. [11G^b-12D^b]: Second Epistle to the Corinthians. [12D^b-12G^a]: Epistle to the Galatians. [12G^a-13A^b]: Epistle to the Ephesians. [13B^a-13C^b]: Epistle to the Philippians. [13C^b-13E^a]: Epistle to the Colossians. [13E^b-

13G^a: First Epistle to the Thessalonians. [**13G^b-13H^a**]: Second Epistle to the Thessalonians. [**13H^a-14B^a**]: First Epistle to Timothy. [**14B^b-14C^b**]: Second Epistle to Timothy. [**14D^a-14D^b**]: Epistle to Titus. [**14E^a**]: Epistle to Philemon. [**14E^b-15C^a**]: Epistle to the Hebrews. [**15C^b-17H^a**]: Acts of the Apostles. [**17H^b-18B^a**]: Epistle of James. [**18B^b-18D^b**]: First Epistle of Peter. [**18D^b-18E^b**]: Second Epistle of Peter. [**18F^a-18G^b**]: First Epistle of John. [**18H^a**]: Second Epistle of John. [**18H^b**]: Third Epistle of John. [**18H^b-19A^a**]: Epistle of Jude. [**19A^b-20D^a**]: Revelation. [**20D^b**]: blank. [**21A^a-21G^a**]: Dominicals and Ferials. [**21G^b**]: Commemorations. [**21H^a-22A^a**]: Proper of the Saints. [**22A^b**]: Common of the Saints. [**22B^a-22C^a**]: blank. [**22C^b**]: flyleaf. [**22D^a**]: pastedown.

Handwriting in the Wycliffite Manuscript

The Wycliffite manuscript Bibles were produced between 1376 and 1450. Books were made during this time at scriptoria, commercial enterprises that accepted work and charged a fee for it; crafts guilds set the work standards and prices according to apprentice, journeyman, and master levels of skill. The typical scriptorium had specific divisions of labor: scribes who cut their own quill pens, mixed ink, and copied texts; gilders who laid and burnished gold leaf in illuminated manuscripts; artists who painted miniatures; and rubricators, who added initial letters (or versals) – frequently in red ink (thus the title “rubricator”). Many scribes in the late fourteenth century were women and they worked alongside men in scriptoria.

Several factors influenced the final written pieces produced at a scriptorium. The objective was to create books that had a uniform appearance throughout, but because several scribes worked on the same project, differences in the handwriting are apparent even if they sat right next to each other using the same exemplar or model. Variations in the handwriting are evident if one scribe cut his quill – an extraordinarily sensitive instrument – at a slightly different angle, or if a scribe ground or mixed the ink a bit thicker, or inked more heavily on the page than fellow scribes. One scribe might have used more pressure on the pen, or written more quickly, or had more fluidity than a less-practiced neighbor. Each of these

elements are reflected in the writing and can be quite clearly seen even in the most formal manuscripts.

The final hundred years of the Gothic period, roughly 1350 to 1450, saw a rapid increase in literacy caused by the expansion and spread of universities, which in turn, led to a huge demand for books. Many professions, including the newly literate merchant class, joined the ranks of the book-consuming public, which before was comprised primarily of aristocratic patrons and monastic scholars. This demand for books – and the ever-growing length of the works to be copied – put pressure on scribes to produce more work and to do it faster.

The prevailing formal bookhands of the late Gothic period were tall, tightly spaced, angular, elegant, and written slowly with great care. These were Gothic Textura Quadrata with diamond-shaped terminal strokes or feet, and Gothic Textura Presciscus, without feet. Variations of these formal hands were seen primarily in “luxury” manuscripts. The luxury manuscripts of the thirteenth, fourteenth, and early fifteenth centuries in England and northern Europe were opulently decorated and illuminated treasures laboriously produced for the Church and for patrons among the nobility such as Jean, Duc de Berry, brother of Charles V, King of France. (*Les Tres Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*, completed in 1413 in the scriptoria and workshops of the Limbourg brothers [Pol, Jan, and Hermann], is a notable example.) The workaday hand of the Gothic period, used for one’s grocery list or casual notes, was Gothic Cursive, a quickly written, informal running script.

The elegant and stately Textura was marvelous to look at, but slow to write. With the huge demand for books, more quickly written – if less elegant – scripts, known as “bastard”

abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz

Gothic Textura Presciscus

aaabcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz

Gothic Textura Quadrata

aaabcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz

Wycliffite Bastard

abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz

Bastard

abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz

Gothic Cursive

abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz

Quickly written Gothic Cursive

hands, were developed. Simply stated, the term “bastard hand” implies a union between an informal or “base” script, such as any of the Gothic Cursive hands, and a formal or “noble” script such as Textura. Bastard hands were written with varying degrees of deliberation depending on the level of elegance and formality desired, or the speed required. When the emphasis is on speed, as in Bastard writing, it is easier to see the individual peculiarities of the hand of the scribe doing the writing.

Some Bastard writing was incorporated into luxury manuscripts, along with miniature paintings and time-consuming decorated and illuminated initial letters. Notable among these

a o m i

Gothic Textura Prescisus

a o m i

Gothic Textura Quadrata

a o m i

Wycliffite Bastard

a o m i

Bastard

a o m i

Gothic Cursive

These four letters represent the basic letterstrokes from which an entire alphabet can be built; minuscule letters define these alphabets.

are the French and Belgian Books of Hours of the fifteenth century in which Bastard writing became a formal bookhand in its own right, taking on many of the stylistic elements and overall color of Textura, but with cursive elements of speed and fluidity. This writing had a liveliness and charm lacking in nearly all Textura writing which, although bold, powerful, and majestic, tended to be stiff and formal. Some of the French and Belgian Bastard manuscripts exhibit writing that is among the most beautiful and eye-pleasing of all time.

The body text in the Octavo Edition of the Wycliffite Manuscript of the New Testament is written in a Bastard hand that

Handwriting in the Wycliffite Manuscript

falls under the general heading of Gothic Littera Bastarda, a vast category encompassing more variations than can reasonably be catalogued. There are sub-scripts as well, which include Bastard Anglicana and Bastard Secretary, a peculiarly English hand. Generally, this family of hands was known as "Bâtarde" in France and "Secretary" in England.

On the initial page of the manuscript, there is one illuminated major letter and another minor one; the text block is bordered by foliated and painted decorations with knotwork corners. While this is not a luxury manuscript, there are very attractive versal letters throughout of a type ubiquitous in lesser manuscripts from the thirteenth century through the Incunabula period (1450-1500). The built-up, versal letters are



Versal letter with filigree tracing.

written in blue and the decorative filigree surrounding them was traced in red with a pointed quill, often insinuating up and down the margin. Frequently in such manuscripts the colors would be reversed: the versal in red and the decorative tracing in blue. Lovely to look at, the versals in this manuscript were rendered quickly and with great skill, most likely by an artist other than the scribe who copied the text.

The writing of the body text of the Wycliffite Manuscript is workaday, Secretary writing, more utilitarian than beautiful; as has been said before, the issue was speed rather than elegance. The writing is in two vertical columns per page with guidelines showing around each column, but none between the lines of writing. This is unusual – such guidelines were often left between the lines of writing as a design element and were frequently colored red to create a visual contrast with the black writing.

The interlinear space is just slightly greater than the x-height (the body measurement of lowercase letters without the ascenders and descenders), giving the page a dense, textured overall color that is enhanced by the density of the writing; this is typical of most of the writing of the period. The strokes of the letterforms are bold, the spaces within and between the letterforms are kept small and tight. The margins are generous, even though it is obvious that they were, at some point, trimmed for bookbinding. There are copious marginal notes on the first several pages, but almost none farther along in the book, indicating that early readers were not unlike current readers, starting with zealous participation and continuing with waning (or at least more silent) enthusiasm.

This Wycliffite Manuscript of the New Testament is important as an example of one of the first Bibles to have been written in the vernacular, in this case Middle English translated from Latin, making it possible for lay persons to read the Scriptures on their own. The handwriting of the body text is competent, and while done quickly, retains a high degree of legibility. The writing itself is not notable calligraphy any more so than the handwriting on the Magna Carta or the Declaration of Independence. What is noteworthy is the content and historic significance of these written records.

Ward Dunham, whose calligraphy illustrates this article, is a blackletter scribe specializing in the transitional hands of the eleventh and twelfth centuries and the full-blown Gothic hands of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. He teaches, exhibits, and lectures throughout the United States and Canada.

Further Reading

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Wycliffite Manuscript. The New Testament. England, 1400-1450.

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Octavo

¶ vj ethi opathens scripsit ebraice in udea / ayanens grece in italia / iohes grece in asia
grece in achana / iohes grece in asia

ix ethi / publicam / a publico cesar qui pimus udea fecit tributaria sue conductore vectigali
fisa sine q publica vectigalia exigunt vel qm publica lucra sectant
vir generat / mulier q parit / sed gigno vtz

aythens hebreis scribens nichil aliud voluit monstrare qm q ex abrahm et dd erat lucas q omibz
lucens usq ad adm pedit mponens filios aliqz sduo legem / sine adoptione / 2 id dicit qm sine
et dicit filij sduo legem qui sustine semine fratris
i reuz et aut v
Electio dand sedm cor fuisse dicit quia non sunt excozta sicut electio sant p ptm asit
o Regu um hoc erit m ruz q poy loquim ad me q si bone emz tulerit / si quemqm
calumniamz sdu / si oppressi aliqui / si de manu cuiusq mnu accipz

Refert ioseph mndicene dno egyptu non fuisse templu i egypto m q no cadert p cōfringere aliqz idola / m dicit
mndicet egyptu / 2 comouebuntur simulacra ei
filij ananiam / rex p dicitur / filij dnm / 2 p dicitur / dnm
A scolomta ncent pueros / antipaz iohem
p dicitur / 2 nepos herodis magni
Agrippa iacobu claudens m carcere petru

Here bigynner ve newe testamēt

Opathen of ieremie **Prolog on mād**
born as he is put first i ordie.
So first he wroot ve gospel in ier
is langage / whos clepiz to god wa
fro puplicans dedis / he takige bi
fore. ve bigynnyngis of tureyne. A
brahm i dany in genaciou of cā.
of oon v is abrahm of ve which ve
firste curtiaciou was in flesch / of
anoz dany whos electiō was actu
herte / of bope fadus forlope cā w
born i lo ve noubre of fourtene pri
es putt. he trechige fory ve bigyn
nyng. fro ve fery of bilemyge i was
in abrahm into ve tyme of cheslyng
i was in dany i cheslyng fro cheslyng.
anoon unto ve day of tūnyngiō / i
dyslyng fro ve day of tūnyngiō m
anoon ito cā. he thewpe ve genaci
ōn of ve comyng of cā / fulfille epy
passinge in tūnyng v he makige go
od bove to ve noubre i to ve tyme bo
ve shulde thewe hī self what he we
re / and in hym self mynistrige ve
werk of god. also in hem whos kym
rede he putte of shulde not denye
ve witnesse of cā / worchige fro ve
bigynnyng of alle. whiche pigis ve
tyme ve ordie ve noubre ve dispo
sitiōn of ve resoi is p cā is god
pat is necessarie to ve fery ve whi
ch was maid of anōman maid on
dir lante. born of a mayde susteide
in flesch al pig facyd i ve croll
v he oiscompyge pulke pigis in hī
sile rplige in body bove ve name
of ve fadn in fadus to ve lone. i
ve lones name to ve fadn. restoi
ge in lones wyonte bigynnyng is
oute endyng thewpyng ve fadn.

to be oon wip hi / for he is oon in ve is
hich gospel it is profitable to me de
kirige god so to knowe ve fakte ve
mydmette of ve laste v pei redige
bi alle pigis vnderstonde bove ve
clepiz of ve apostle i ve werk of ve
gospel i ve lone of god kēnyng i fle
sch / and vei hē knowe in hym in ve whi
ch pei ber knowe i delivry to knowe
to us forlope it was to studie of pre
nyng bove to take ve fery of pig do
i not to be stille to me sechige bly
liche ve ordynance of god / worchige
to be vnderstonde. **Here endyng ve**
prolog. i bigynner ve gospel of mād

Opathen of ieremie **Prolog on mād**
He booke of ve / **O. p.**
generaciōn of ihu
cā. ve lone of dany
ve lone of abrahm / A
brahm gedre oz bigat ha
at. **Ant** forlope bygart iacob / **Ja**
cob forlope bygart iudas / **I**ne
briver / **Judas** forlope bygart pha
res / **Z**arad of thamar / **Fares** for
lope bygart efrom / **E**from forlo
pe bygart aram / **A**ram forlope
bygart ammadab / **A**mmadab for
lope bygart naron / **N**aron for
lope bygart salmon / **S**almon forlope
bigat booz of raab / **B**ooz forlope
bigat obeh of ruth / **O**beh forlo
pe bigat ielle / **I**elle forlope bigat da
uid / **D**avid forlope bygart
bigat salomon of iromā / **S**almon forlope
vries wif / **S**almon forlope bigat
roboam / **R**oboam forlope bigat ab
as / **A**bas forlope bigat ala / **A**la for
lope bigat iosephach / **I**osephach forlo
pe bigat iozab / **I**ozab forlope bigat
osias / **O**shas forlope bigat ioathan
ioathan forlope bigat achaz / **A**chaz

